

# detaining the peacemakers

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Just over two years ago, the black township in the coastal hamlet of Port Alfred was fast establishing itself as a model of community organisation.

The tranquil, 4 000-strong white community, 90% of whom are retired people, was taken by surprise when the impoverished black community living on the eastern bank of the Kowie River organised to fight for the upgrading of basic services and a better quality of life.

The people used boycotts — school boycotts, consumer boycotts and work stayaways — to pressurise the white community into negotiating with them. Before long the blacks and whites in Port Alfred were hammering out innovative approaches to their problems together, and their efforts were receiving accolades from around the country.

But the State of Emergency has changed all that.

Now a police Casspir stands guard near the township entrance like a permanent warning finger. Army troops patrol the streets. State-trained black municipal guards — 'vigilantes in uniform' as they have been dubbed — aid their work, ensuring that township residents observe the late-night curfew. Large numbers of people have been detained, while most leaders lucky enough to have evaded the security force dragnet are in hiding. And the militancy of the youth now flares unchecked in spasmodic angry outbursts against the intransigence of the state.

The detention of township leader Gugile Nkwinti best sums up the cruel irony of the situation — that the alternative posed by this community and others like it was misperceived as a 'threat to law and order' by the state, warranting a massive offensive in an attempt to

crush the democratic movement and wipe out its legal space.

A striking figure, handsome and articulate, 37-year-old Gugile worked as a senior psychiatric nurse at the Port Alfred Hospital before registering for a law degree at Rhodes University in 1986. But until Gugile's detention in January this year, it was for his fight for the development of a non-racial, democratic movement against the apartheid system that he was widely acknowledged.

'The key is forming organisation,' he told an interviewer in 1986. 'An organisation is good ... when it works when you are not there. If I have succeeded in doing anything, it was because they (the community) were behind my back, pushing.'

The first organisation formed in the 10 000-strong black community was the Nonzamo Student Guardian Association (NOSGA), which began in 1983 to address specific problems at the local high school. Gugile was elected chairperson. Negotiations with education officials about an unsatisfactory school principal met with success when pupils' demands were met and a school boycott called off. NOSGA arranged for administration of the school to pass to a parent-teacher-student association, and the organisation continued to demand better school facilities.

Gugile's wife, Koleka, says that NOSGA was 'the mother body which taught people how to organise'. Indeed, a number of organisations grew in NOSGA's wake. The Nkwintis, a strong team, began operating an informal township information centre out of their home to provide advice on pensions, unemployment payments and pass law problems. Later the service officially established itself in

a separate building.

In 1984 a separate organisation branched off from the information centre to deal specifically with pension problems. The Port Alfred Workers' Association was the next to form, to help workers demand their rights. The Port Alfred Youth Congress (PAYCO) began in 1985, and in 1986 the Port Alfred Women's Organisation (PAWO) was founded.

Representatives from most of these organisations sat on a central committee of the Port Alfred Residents' Civic Organisation. The civic made decisions on various issues confronting the community as a whole, staying in close contact with the residents through street and area committees. The group also ran a crèche and a pre-primary school.

It was within this organisational context that boycotts were explored as a strategy to bring state authorities and white businessmen to the negotiating table. After the success of the 1984 school boycott, the youth in the community called for a boycott of the township's beerhall, after it was bought by a partnership which included a former policeman. The community felt that the beerhall complex could be better used as a crèche and handicraft centre. The beerhall owners asked Gugile to help them arrange negotiations. A meeting was held, but before the issue could be resolved, Gugile was arrested. However, the charge of 'intimidation' was withdrawn after one of the beerhall owners confirmed that Gugile had in fact been constructively attempting to defuse the situation.

Gugile was imprisoned again in June 1985 for launching a project aimed at unifying the community. The old cemetery on the edge of the township had become a dumping ground for rubbish, and the idea was to get the people together to clean it.

'There must be a value orientation. We must find the thin thread which will link everyone, something which will hold them together for a long time. And it must be a positive thing. This was the cemetery,' Gugile said. Police, thinking that the gathering was some meeting, dispersed the crowd with teargas and rubber bullets, and Gugile was

detained for 14 days.

Yet the project succeeded in pulling people together. The community decided to erect a single tombstone for everyone buried there. They collected more than R1 200,00 to buy a monument and persuaded the Administration Board to erect a fence around the cemetery to keep the area clean and well-groomed. Gugile described the day of the unveiling thus: 'There was a huge church service in the stadium that day. Everyone came back for that, even from Johannesburg. People would say, "so-and-so never came back home since he left for the mines years ago, and he came back for the tomestone".'

The cemetery clean-up was intended to be a positive, constructive project, but Gugile's detention touched off the worst unrest in the history of Port Alfred. A two-week consumer boycott was called, and according to Koleka, 'the youth were angry and there was fire, fire, fire in the streets of the township'. But, true to character, as soon as Gugile was released he became involved in efforts to negotiate a peace.

Fragile though it proved to be, peace was achieved through the establishment of a negotiating committee of which Gugile was Chair. The white community, feeling the pinch from the loss of black spending power, was keen to set up a joint white business and municipal negotiating group called the Employers' Federation, which set about discussing the township's grievances with the Port Alfred Chamber of Commerce.

The list of grievances was long, including demands for a new school, the withdrawal of security forces from the township, the release of several youths from detention, the abolition of segregated entrances into white shops, a single non-racial municipality, a rent ceiling for pensioners and a programme of job creation. The whites agreed to most of these demands. The Black Civic Group took their response to a community meeting attended by more than half the township residents, and the boycott was ceremoniously called off.

This negotiation process had far-reaching results. The racially-

segregated shop entrances disappeared immediately, and a new school was completed. Behind-the-scenes discussions resulted in the withdrawal of the police and army, and detainees were released on bail. There were reports of improved employer-employee relationships, and agreements on many other matters began to move forward. The Black Civic Group, the Employers' Federation and the Chamber of Commerce continued to meet regularly to discuss various projects.

But perhaps the most amazing outcome of the situation, in South African terms, was the effort to establish a single non-racial local authority for Port Alfred, to replace the standard separate administrative bodies for black areas and white areas. The Black Civic Group's proposal reiterated what democrats all over South Africa had been maintaining for so long: 'We are convinced that if we (people of all races) work together, South Africa would have no peer as a place in which to live.' It was a reasonable proposal, suggesting, for example, that the money budgeted for the defunct community council be allocated to projects such as improved roads and lighting. The white town council decided to petition the government for permission to establish a single governing body for the whole of Port Alfred, and they were still awaiting a reply when the first State of Emergency was declared on 21 July 1985.

It was also at this time that Gugile was asked by two school principals to end a school boycott. He agreed to address the pupils, who in turn returned to school. But the students soon resumed their boycott when, the day after the Emergency regulations were promulgated, Gugile was detained. What followed was to be the beginning of a wearisome cycle of harassment, threats and the ordeal of detention for both Gugile and Koleka, a situation which continues to the present day.

Gugile was held for six days, only to be re-detained on 19 September for another six weeks. Despite the major role he had played in ending the previous boycott, police insisted that he was the 'instigator' of a new

boycott call, and it took a court order to release him. Next, PAWO called for a stayaway by the women of the township, most of whom are domestic workers. This was a protest against the failure of the police to bring to justice a suspected informer who had been identified as the rapist of an elderly township resident. Although the stayaway was called off when the white women of Port Alfred met with a PAWO delegation to discuss the women's grievances, police immediately detained Gugile and this time Koleka as well.

Another consumer boycott was called in protest against their detentions. They were released, but in the months that followed, their dogs were shot, their home broken into and set alight, and telephonic threats made against their lives. The couple decided to go into hiding, to live separately and to move around frequently to avoid detection. This was to be their lifestyle for eleven traumatic months. Yet even then Gugile continued to take forward his responsibilities to the community. When he was detained in January this year he was involved in sensitive back-to-school negotiations in his capacity as UDF East Cape zone organiser.

Today, with the second State of Emergency into its fourteenth month, the atmosphere in the township is still tense. Municipal police occupy the former information centre and crèche and surround it with tents for an around-the-clock police presence. The Nkwinti's home stands bare and fire-blackened. While it seems a tragic waste that the community's primary peacemaker is punished for the community's efforts to better its conditions, Gugile himself remains unbowed. During the first State of Emergency he said, '... [it] has disrupted our democratic organisations. But it is not easy for anyone to kill the structures of Port Alfred. People have tasted some kind of freedom. The organisations are there; the State of Emergency will do nothing. ... Jail makes people come out more confident. We are very grateful to the state for this. Many activists from other areas will learn from Port Alfred; they will exchange knowledge while they are in jail. It cannot be killed. □